

# Trumpeter (1993)

ISSN: 0832-6193

## Maps and Metaphors

**David Berger**  
York University

David Berger is completing his masters degree at York University in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. He calls his field of studies "Environmental Literary Theory and Criticism" in which he is studying the relationship, or lack of relationship, between literature, language and the environment. He is also an avid canoeist.

Cold spring dawn. The sun's rays peek around the corner of the earth. I lie half asleep on a large flat rock, cocooned under six inches of down. I open my eyes to see the sun in a clear, pale-blue sky. The night's warmth held under my sleeping bag, while the night's cold waits outside. Mosquitos who buzzed in my ears last night have found their own shelter; they hide under leaves and rocks. Out on the water gulls cry; a splash signals fish chasing the insects that hover and float on the lake.

The rock on which I lay sticks out from the corner of an island. There is no place for earth and seeds to gather here and so the rock remains windswept and bare. Close by, there are trees, blueberry bushes, pockets of grass and a small swamp. At one time the islands and lakes of northern Ontario were all a great mountain chain, rising high up into the sky. That was over a billion years ago. Now the whole landscape is fairly flat and low.

Underneath my head there's a pack with a map of the area. If I compared it to the landscape as it was when there were mountains here I would find little, if anything in common. It would look like a mixed up jig-saw puzzle. I wonder if daily there is not a change in the land. But because of the maps we carry around, our pre- formed, never changing view of what things are like, we do not have to bother to watch these changes.

Ten thousand years ago, when the last glaciers retreated they scraped the rocks. I reach out my hand and feel the lines, like furrows for planting seed. And then there were no trees, no forest, no vegetation. It is all back now.

A quick breakfast; oatmeal over the stove. Comments about the cold pass between me and Kim. The others are quiet. Pondering over the map together with a warm cup of tea in my hands, we decide to portage up the golden staircase: three waterfalls, three portages of 530, 270 and 870 meters. They are known for their scree slopes and steep climbs.

I am bothered by how much I know. My knowledge a campfire out of control. It burns up the country spreading with the wind. There was a time when we could sit around the campfire and around us a mysterious world came close to our circle. Now we take our torches of knowledge (not wisdom) from the fire, and turn on that dark. We peer into it, as if it is some sick child who we have to cure. But we are the sick. We are the troubled. The forest, the mysteries out there will be fine by themselves.

The sunlight, not yet at full strength soaks into my dark sweater; the cold wind blows through. The lake water is dark and small waves splash on to the shore. The trees are still bare, and the sun's heat collects at ground level. Ferns, grasses, sorrel and clover take

advantage of the light; they are the first green on the land. Tree buds hold back for a while, waiting for warmer air and for their sap to rise from the roots deep in the ground.

We get into the canoes and head across the lake. The wind is strong and we dig our paddles deep into the dark water. The shore moves by slowly. The map sitting on the pack in front of me gives me a sort of power over the land. When I `know' what lies on the other side of a hill, I look at it in a different way.

If I travelled through this area without a guide, if I had to form a picture of the whole for myself, then I would really pay attention to landforms, to directions of lakes and wind. But the map allows me a certain amount of carelessness about all these details.

If I lived out here all my life, and had no calendar (a map of the days) I would have to note when the days began to get longer. I would want to know these things; it would be up to me to figure out from which direction the birds returned and went. And to find all this out my senses would be crucial. I think that we have too much information, we can rely on it rather than ourselves. Our senses have become a frill, not wholly necessary to our perception of the world. We tend to use our minds, and `fact' is not a matter of feeling (of the body) but a matter of knowing (of the mind) - rational, deductive, reductive - culture-bound knowledge.

I lean forward and pick up the map case. I open it and take out the map. It is covered in mac-tac, a thick plastic which protects it from water. It does not tear easily.

I rip the map in half along the fold.

I put the two halves together and rip, the sound strange out here, but it's caught and carried away by the wind in an instant.

As the canoe heads down the lake against the waves, with a wind blowing from the northwest, I slowly drop the sixteen pieces of paper into our wake. Each one spins lazily in the whirlpools of my paddle.

On the shore I notice the shape of a hill that looks familiar. I think that I have been here before.

---

Copyright retained by author(s)